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Chapter 9
Through Consciousness Parted from Dream: Alternative Knowledge Forms in Karoline von Günderrode

Anna Ezekiel

Abstract  Karoline von Günderrode’s reputation as a mystical writer makes her a likely candidate as a proponent of a negative philosophy. However, the historical emphasis on Günderrode’s mystical and lyrical writings reflects gender stereotypes about women’s writing and ignores Günderrode’s strengths as an epic and historical writer. It is therefore important to approach claims about Günderrode’s supposed mysticism carefully. This paper is a preliminary attempt to investigate Günderrode’s claims about knowledge, including knowledge of the absolute, asking: What does Günderrode think knowledge is? What does she think the purpose of knowledge is—i.e., what does she think knowledge gets us, or does for us? And how do her claims differ from those philosophers, such as Novalis, whose thinking on knowledge (including of the absolute) seems to resemble hers? I argue that Günderrode maintains that human beings can experience, or “know,” a reality behind the discrete objects and events that comprise the world of appearances, and that she integrates this idea into a coherent worldview in a unique way. Specifically, I argue that Günderrode reconceptualizes the nature of death and selfhood in specific ways that allow her to make sense of the possibility of experiencing the true nature of the world behind the divisions that are characteristic of human knowledge and existence.

1  Introduction

Karoline von Günderrode (1780–1806) is best known for her biography, particularly her spectacular suicide at the age of 26. This notoriety has contributed to a steady stream of interest in her life and writings over the last 200 years, the latter of which is usually interpreted in biographical terms, and both of which tend to be presented as expressing a morbid, conflicted and pathological personality. But I argue that an original approach to philosophical questions and debates of her time underlies much of Günderrode’s work—including the constellation of concepts in

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her writing that is most commonly used to paint a picture of the tragic lover and poet, i.e., the concepts of death, love, and union. These concepts have a theoretical meaning for Günderrode and reflect her critical engagement with Early German Romantic models of the nature of human existence and the world. In addition, statements about Günderrode’s supposedly pathological sense of self arguably reflect a misreading of her claims about the nature of the self in general (Ezekiel 2016b). I will touch on these issues below, in relation to the role of consciousness in Günderrode’s account of knowledge. In general, I argue that there is more to be said about Günderrode’s work and thought than we can gain from a reductive biographical reading of her writings, and that in fact these writings reflect a unique stance on key issues in German idealism.

This paper applies this general concern with interpreting Günderrode as a thinker rather than a romantic personality to Günderrode’s thought on the topic of knowledge, considering her claims in the context of traditions of negative philosophy. Günderrode’s reputation as a mystical writer makes her a likely candidate as a proponent of a negative philosophy. From the early years of the reception of her writings, Günderrode’s work has been presented as mystical, lyrical, and subjective. This interpretation of her strengths as a writer and thinker was current even while she was alive. For example, the philologist and mythologist Georg Friedrich Creuzer, with whom Günderrode was having an affair, praised the “mythic” and “mystical” aspects of Günderrode’s writing, encouraging her to develop her work in the direction of “feminine” lyrical poetry and away from her interest in epic forms and historical dramas. In one instance, he wrote to her: “Let me give you a judgment about your poetry in general. In its main element it is, I think (and for this reason it is so dear to me) mystical, revelatory. For this reason you are so at home in the east.” And, he continued: “Your poesie is mystic [...]—and for that reason it is not plastic. / Therefore everything is alien to you that by its nature demands productive systematic form, therefore the real systematic Drama.”

This assessment of the strengths and rightful focus of Günderrode’s work continued after her death. Scholars have often focused on Günderrode’s lyrical and mystical writings at the expense of her dramas and her interest in history and concrete great events and figures. These accounts tend to conflate a romanticized or mythologized image of Günderrode herself with the perceived focus of her writing. For example, in 1878 Karl Schwartz praised Günderrode’s writings as “the pure mirror of her true beautiful individuality.” Over a century later, Christa Bürger described Günderrode as having created a “night-world” in her work, and Günderrode herself as a “shadow among shadows”; Bürger claims that Günderrode “only had the will

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3 Creuzer (1912 [1806]). English translations of Günderrode’s writings are my own or taken from Ezekiel (2016a), Ezekiel (Forthcoming), and Nassar and Gjesdal (2021). All other translations are my own.
4 Schwartz (1977 [1878], 221).
to [create] form, but not the power to create her own.” Christa Wolf omitted all of Günderrode’s dramas—traditionally considered a more systematic and historical form of writing—from her 1979 selected edition of Günderrode’s works.

One problem with the overemphasis on Günderrode’s mystical and lyrical writings, as others have pointed out, is that this interpretation reflects traditional European gender stereotypes about the topics and styles of writing that women were supposed to pursue, as well as about supposedly “feminine” qualities of writing, as opposed to the supposedly “masculine” qualities of clarity, rigor, power and historical accuracy. Relatedly, this interpretation ignores other of Günderrode’s strengths that fit with what would have been considered “masculine” writing, especially her skills as an epic and historical writer, as shown, for example, by her plays *Muhammad, the Prophet of Mecca* and *Hildgund.*

The recognition of these gendered blinkers in the reception of Günderrode’s work, and the identification of aspects of her work that, partly as a consequence, have been neglected, provides an initial justification for approaching claims about Günderrode’s supposed mysticism carefully. And, given that there has not yet been any rigorous investigation of what Günderrode claimed about knowledge in general or, in particular, about the possibility of knowledge of the absolute, I will not presuppose that Günderrode promoted a negative philosophy. Instead, this paper is the beginning of an investigation into the question of what Günderrode thought about knowledge: What does she think knowledge is? What does she think knowledge is for human beings? What does she think the purpose of knowledge is—i.e., what does she think knowledge gets us, or does for us?

Günderrode’s corpus includes numerous stories about seekers for knowledge, whose quests are motivated by a basic distinction between knowledge of worldly things and knowledge of a truth that lies behind earthly forms. For example, the protagonist of the poem “The Adept” leaves his life of scientific research to seek wisdom in the east. After being initiated into an Indian religion, he realizes “How vain all his former knowledge” was, for “He never knew things’ souls; / Made do with names and appearance.” Similarly, the narrator of “Story of a Brahmin” moves from a life engaged in trade, punctuated by the search for pleasure, to the rational pursuit of the good and the true, and from there to a life of religious contemplation, which eventually leads him to become aware of the true inner nature of the universe. In the play *Magic and Destiny,* the mage Alcmenes sees through the veil of the everyday world to the truth that lies behind it: “I do not rest,” he claims, “for my eye is not deceived / By the powers’ appearance of rest; / I see the inner struggle of

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5 Bürger (1995, 36, 37); see also Behrens (1995, 11).
7 Hoff et al. (1995, 99, 103).
life forces, / That sleep and night charitably cloak for you.”¹⁰  These are popular
tropes, but I argue that Günderrode integrates the idea that human beings can experi-
ence the reality behind appearances into a coherent worldview in a unique way. That
is, I argue that Günderrode reconceptualizes the nature of (a) death and (b) selfhood
in ways that make sense of the possibility of experiencing the true nature of
the world.

2  Günderrode as a Gnostic

Let us take a closer look at how Günderrode thinks this knowledge of whatever may
lie behind appearances is possible, and what she claims it is like. One possibility is
that, in line with the gnostic tradition, Günderrode saw “true” knowledge as occur-
ring in mystical experiences of union with the divine. In other words, glimpses of
true knowledge are obtained in religious experiences that provide a foretaste of a
real union that occurs after death.

There are undeniable mystical overtones along these lines in many of
Günderrode’s works. We find amongst her writings poems that fit well, in particular,
with the erotic-mystical tradition, such as “The Kiss in the Dream,” “The Pilgrims,”
and “Love,” which merge religious with erotic imagery to indicate the union of the
individual with a lover, who can be seen as a metaphor for God. “The Kiss in the
Dream” links this idea of union with that of “contemplation” (Betrachtung)—a kind
of knowledge or awareness the exact nature of which is not specified but which here
suggests an orientation to the infinite: “In dreams such life was immersed, /
Therefore I live to contemplate eternal dreams.”¹¹

In Günderrode’s work we also encounter the mystical trope of the ocean,¹²
including images of merging with an oceanic whole, functioning as a metaphor for
union with the divine, and at the same time for union with the entire universe. The
poem “Piedro” begins with the phrase “Darkness rests upon the waters,”¹³ recalling
Genesis 1:2, which describes the beginnings of creation: “and darkness was upon
the face of the deep.”¹⁴ At the end of the poem, Piedro dies, and we learn that he
“sleeps deep in the ocean.”¹⁵ “The Pilgrims” and “An Apocalyptic Fragment” also
use ocean imagery. In the former, the first pilgrim describes wandering over the
earth, seeking the ocean, while the second pilgrimage connects this wandering and
seeking more explicitly to earthly life and the hope for a return to heaven.¹⁶ In “An

¹⁴King James Bible Online (2020).
Apocalyptic Fragment,” Günderrode writes: “I became aware that all the creatures that had climbed from the ocean returned to it and generated themselves again in changing forms.”

3 Other Indications of Mysticism in Günderrode’s Work

In addition to images of mystical union, many of Günderrode’s pieces, including “The Wanderer’s Descent,” “The Adept,” “The Frank in Egypt,” and “Story of a Brahmin,” describe journeys into foreign lands or the depths of the earth in search of knowledge beyond the everyday and beyond European enlightenment science. There are also many religious or prophetic figures in Günderrode’s writings, including the mage Alcmenes, the prophet Muhammad, and the “seeress” in the short story “Timur,” who have insight into the true nature of things beyond the capacity of ordinary human beings or ordinary knowledge. These individuals, it seems, have access in some form to aspects of the world that escape ordinary human understanding.

In several of Günderrode’s pieces, the protagonists learn about themselves and the world after travelling eastwards. For example, after consecration as a priest, the protagonist of “The Adept” sees the eternal spirit of nature “ever new / And ever old in eternal change / As it is in all forms.” In “Story of a Brahmin,” the narrator first experiences a murky awareness of the oneness of nature “ever heard its voice, but I did not yet know where it came from; but the more I listened to it, the clearer it was to me that there was a fundamental force in which everything, visible and invisible, was connected.” Later, this character becomes more explicitly aware of a single force that runs through all the forms of the universe, constantly dissolving them and recreating them in new shapes. He explicitly claims that the essence of all religions is insight into the absolute whole that underlies appearances, stating that “the intuition of the original primal ground is the deepest soul of religions.” He tells his audience that this ground:

is an infinite force, an eternal life, that is everything that is, that was and will become, that engenders itself in mysterious ways, that remains eternal through all change and dying. It is at the same time the ground of all things and the things themselves, the condition and the conditioned, the creator and the creature, and it divides and separates itself in various figures, becomes sun, moon, stars, plants, animals and human beings together, and flows through itself in fresh streams of life and contemplates itself in human beings in holy humility.

This idea of an original undifferentiated absolute that divides itself in order to create
the individual entities that we encounter in the world seems consistent with the work
of Novalis, Fichte or Schelling. And when the narrator of “Story of a Brahmin”
describes the limitations of language and human reason for understanding the infi-
nite truth of the universe using the common Romantic trope of the veiled statue of
Isis, we might be forgiven for thinking that Günderrode is simply rehashing Early
German Romantic ideas in a story of her own:

You ask me, young friend, to lead you in through the gates of the eternal temple of religion.
Know that its mark is infinity and speech is finite. But I will attempt to unveil before you
the holy statue of Isis at Saïs (under which stand the words ‘I am what is, what was and will
be’); but so that your inner sense does not completely come undone before the goddess, you
will not see her, neither through your reason, nor through your knowledge.22

4 The Quest for Knowledge as a Search Within

Let us follow this comparison between Günderrode and Early German Romanticism
further. Although Günderrode’s thought (especially her metaphysics) is often said to
be closest to that of Schelling, with regard to her account of knowledge there are
close parallels with Novalis’ work in particular. However, I argue that Günderrode
does not describe a via negativa similar to that which emerges in Novalis’ writings.
That is, unlike Novalis, she does not describe or advocate an approach to knowledge
of what is unknowable through a modified deployment of various ordinary strate-
gies for knowledge and communication, including mirroring relationships between
subject and object, repeated iterations of attempts to describe what cannot be
described, and self-awareness about the inadequacies of language.23

This difference is exemplified by the differences in the two thinkers’ uses of cave
metaphors to portray the search for knowledge. In the novel Henry of Ofterdingen,
Novalis uses the image of a journey into a cave to represent the uncovering of secret
knowledge. Henry enters a cave where he finds a book describing his own life.24 For
Novalis, this represents the reflective relationship between one’s own inner life and
the world outside, if one penetrates to their hearts—in other words, it indicates the
reflection between the subject, or mind, and object, or the world encountered by the
mind. Each can be learned about by encounters with the other.25 Thus Novalis
famously claims: “We dream of journeys through the universe: but is the universe

23 See, for example, Novalis’ “Monologue,” in Novalis (1960f:2), 672m (see also Novalis (1960f:2,
427 no. 32–33, 439 no. 68, 463 no. 114, 522 no. 3, 523 no. 8, 617 no. 17; Novalis 1960f:3, 685–686
no. 671). For examples of a similar approach in the work of Friedrich Schlegel, see Schlegel (1967,
42, 152 no. 42, 363f).
24 Novalis (1960f:1, 264).
not within us?" And, in another statement: “The mysterious way goes inwards. Eternity with its worlds, the past and future, is in us or nowhere.” In Novalis’ view, the reflection between the world of the subject and that of the object is necessarily imperfect, but we can increase the correspondence between these through a repeated movement inwards and outwards, gradually shaping ourselves to be more like the outside world and the outside world to be more like us. For Novalis, the self is therefore revealed through what is other to it, and in particular through what is apparently alien and different. In places, he uses gender difference and the east as the other to stereotyped western androcentricity, consciousness and rationality in order to indicate what escapes language and understanding—which is, ultimately, the infinite. And, through efforts to represent what is beyond representation, which necessarily fail, we learn about what is beyond the human capacity to know: the other, the non-conscious world of nature, and the divine.

Günderrode also uses imagery of caves and a descent into the earth to express the search for knowledge. In her dramatic dialogue “The Wanderer’s Descent,” the protagonist, seeking the truth about the nature of the world, is guided through caverns to the place where, according to the mythology of the dialogue, the things of the world exist before their division into separate entities:

Oh guide me! You know well the paths
Into the old realm of dark midnight;
Down will I go to the gloomy shore
Where never the morning, never the midday smiles.
I will renounce the day’s shimmer
That unwillingly weds us to the earth,
That glimmer only blinded me, deceitfully,
Never chose the earth as its homeland.
Vainly I wanted to grasp the fugitive,
But it can never leave constant change.
So guide me to the circle of silent powers,
In whose deep womb chaos slept,
Before, from the dark of eternal midnights,
The light-spirit called it up to life.
There, where the earth’s womb, still unforced,
Modestly envelops itself in dark veils,
Where, never penetrated by bold light,
It does not yet engender this wavering image
Of things’ order, this race of earth!

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28 For example, Novalis claims “The first step will be a look inward, segregating observation of our self. Who stops here gains only half. The second step must be an effective look outward, self-actuating, sustained observation of the external world” (1960:2, 422 no. 26/423 no. 24).
29 For discussion of this point, see Kuzniar (1992) and (1988), Seyhan (1992, 78–79), Strand (1998).
30 For example, Henry’s interactions with Zulima and Mathilde in Heinrich von Ofterdingen (Novalis 1960:1, 236–239, 284, 287–288).
Unlike Henry in Novalis’ account, Günderrode’s protagonist does not find an image
or reflection of themselves in the cave. However, the “spirits of earth” do advise
them to look inwards for the answers they seek, suggesting that human beings are a
part of nature that reflects nature’s reality:

But look down, into your soul’s grounds;
What you seek here you will find there,
You are just the cosmos’ seeing mirror.
There too are midnights that one day will dawn,
There too are powers that awaken from sleep
There too is a workshop of nature.\(^{32}\)

The strong parallels between the language and imagery of the above two accounts
of the knowledge-seeker and the cave contribute to the temptation to assimilate
Günderrode’s model of knowledge to that of Novalis. However, there is a major dif-
ference between Novalis’ ideas of an iterated approach to a regulative ideal of abso-
lute knowledge and Günderrode’s emphasis on immediate intuition or direct
knowledge of the absolute. In Novalis’ \textit{via negativa}, language and representation
repeatedly fall short of the absolute that they attempt to capture, and yet point
towards it in part by asserting their own failure. By contrast, for Günderrode the
“seeing mirror” of human consciousness is simply unable to encounter the “primal
force” of “life”;\(^{33}\) it reflects only the already-differentiated living world. There is no
indication that, by recognizing one’s failure to really know this underlying life-
force, one moves closer to new forms of understanding that are closer or more ade-
quate. On the contrary: the spirits of earth tell Günderrode’s narrator that the journey
has been “In vain!” and “Too late!”\(^{34}\)

In other words, for Günderrode there is a sharp dichotomy between forms of
representation and thought of the world “of light” (as she puts it in “The Wanderer’s
Descent”), i.e., the world that we are used to thinking about, and other forms of
thought, awareness or experience that are adequate to the original, undifferentiated
nature of the universe. The protagonist of “The Wanderer’s Descent,” like
Günderrode’s other protagonists, does not discover a series of mirrors or micro-
cosms and macrocosms, nor forms of metalepsis that represent an upward spiral
towards closer knowledge of the absolute; nor do they discover hints of something
beyond what can be grasped. Instead, those of Günderrode’s characters that under-
stand something of the world beyond the way it appears to ordinary human beings
do so because they grasp that something directly. They directly experience undif-
ferentiation, that is, the original, absolute force that underlies the world we experi-
ence in everyday life. Thus, in “Story of a Brahmin,” the Brahmin says that “a
community exists between human beings in whom the inner sense has arisen and
the worldspirit.”\(^{35}\) And in “The Manes,” the teacher claims that it is not through the

outer senses, but through “inner sense” and “the spiritual eye,” that one perceives the world beyond the ordinary world: a perception that “often reveals itself only like a quick flash that is then buried again by dark night.”

There are similar moments of unity in Novalis’ work, notably in his “Hymns to the Night,” where he exclaims to the beloved he sees in his vision that: “you heralded the living night to me—made me human—feed on my body with spiritual fervour, so I mix myself airily, more deeply with you.” For Novalis, this is a foretaste, something only available in dreams and visions. In the same piece, he writes:

Holy sleep—do not too seldom gladden in this earthly daily task the ones dedicated to the night. Only fools mistake you and are not aware of sleep as the shadow that you, in each twilight of the truthful night, compassionately cast upon us. They do not feel you in the golden flow of the grapes—in the wonderful oil of the almond tree, and in the brown juice of the poppy.

For Novalis, it is fundamentally impossible for living human beings to experience union with the cosmos, and there is a sound reason for this. For the Early German Romantics, like Fichte, knowledge of what is undifferentiated is impossible by definition, because it lacks the subject-object distinction that is necessary for knowledge. It is only after death that we can truly experience unity—and then no knowledge of it will be possible.

For Günderrode, too, we cannot truly experience union with the whole or grasp the undifferentiated while we are alive. For example, in “The Wanderer’s Descent” the “spirits of earth” tell the Wanderer that he cannot experience the undifferentiated chaos of the world prior to individuation because human beings are “[t]hrough your consciousness already parted from dream.” But it is here that Günderrode’s work differs from Novalis’ in an interesting way. For Günderrode, like Novalis, genuine awareness of the absolute is impossible while alive, and available only in glimpses, while consciousness is impossible after death—but Günderrode has a particularly robust idea of how the self nevertheless continues to exist, along with its ability to be aware and experience.

5 Knowledge, Consciousness and the Self

Günderrode was aware of the requirement for the subject-object distinction for knowledge, and its importance within the philosophical context of Idealism and Romanticism. She studied Novalis, Fichte, Schelling and Kant and was conversant with their theories of knowledge. So when she writes about the possibility of knowledge or of some form of awareness beyond consciousness, what does she mean?
In 1801, Günderrode wrote to her friend Gunda Brentano that:

In general it’s totally incomprehensible to me that we have no consciousness other than perception of effects, never of causes. All other knowledge seems to me (when I think of this) not worthy of knowledge, as long as I don’t know the cause of the knowledge, my faculty of knowledge. To me, this ignorance is the most unbearable lack, the greatest contradiction. And I think if we really ever enter the borders of a second life, then one of our first inner phenomena would have to be that our consciousness would grow larger and clearer; for it would be unbearable to drag this limitation into a second life.  

At first glance, this could be a banal reference to the afterlife, or simply a repetition of the Christian idea, also found in Novalis, that the foretaste of union with other individuals and with the divine that we can experience in dreams and religious visions will finally be fulfilled after death. But I think Günderrode claims something more than this: i.e., that not only will this union be fulfilled after death, but that we ourselves will be able to experience it. More specifically, I argue that Günderrode conceives of a form of selfhood and a form of knowledge that extend beyond the individualized, conscious human life that we are accustomed to regarding as integral to our “self.” In other words, Günderrode decentralizes consciousness from her model of the self and attempts to imagine what this would mean (to use a term anachronistically) phenomenologically.

To return to the letter quoted above, the first part of Günderrode’s claim, that we only ever know effects and not their causes, is grounded in Günderrode’s study of the work of Kant and Fichte. In her notes on the second book in Fichte’s Vocation of Humankind, on “knowledge,” Günderrode summarizes Fichte’s position about the unreliable nature of knowledge of external things in the following way:

In all perceptions I only perceive my own state: I see this surface, it seems green to me, i.e., it makes an impression on me that I call green. The visual sensation green, therefore, is part of me. [...] Whether these sensations really match an existing green surface I do not know, because I only know my sensations. [...] The consciousness of a thing outside me is nothing more than the product of my capacity to represent.

In a close paraphrase of Fichte, Günderrode notes not only the impossibility of the knowledge of objects outside us, but also the implications of this claim for our knowledge of our selves:

Whether my body—indeed my whole I—is anything more than my thinking and having thought I am it can just as little be proven as the fact that real things exist outside me. [...] I become conscious of the thinking etc. as a determined event, but not of a capacity to do it, still less of an essence that possesses this capacity.—[... T]his inwardly intuited thinking is only half a thought, because, according to my laws of thought, for each condition I must add the thought of a ground of the condition. Thus, here, I add to the thought of what is determined (my real thinking) the thought of something that is determinable (a manifold possible thinking). I grasp this possible thinking as a whole, which, because I cannot grasp anything infinite, seems to me to be a finite capacity, and because something independent

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40 Günderrode (1992, 75–76).
of thinking is represented by this way of thinking, I represent to myself a *being* and essence that has this capacity.\(^{42}\)

I suggest that a model like the above, taken from or based on Fichte, underpins Günderrode’s claims in her letter to Gunda. In this letter, Günderrode introduces her general complaint about the inadequacy of knowledge with a specific complaint about her inability to know herself: “sometimes I have no opinion of myself at all, my self-observations are so fluctuating.”\(^{43}\) It is this kind of statement that has often led to claims that Günderrode’s sense of self was unstable and pathological, but, as I argue elsewhere (Ezekiel 2016b), these statements in fact convey a general model of personal identity. In other words, Günderrode is not claiming that she herself has a particularly unstable sense of self, but that the self in general is by its nature unstable and changing. According to this model, the sensations and other perceptions—or intuitions—that we become aware of in observing ourselves are constantly fluctuating, and, due to the limitations of human reason, we extrapolate from these to a bearer of these states, or an essence, underlying them. But, as Günderrode draws from her notes on Fichte, the extrapolation of an essence underlying these states does not necessarily reflect reality, but only our own necessary ways of thinking.

Günderrode derives two significant implications from this. First, the actual existing selves that we are aware of as human individuals are in fact not unitary, consolidated selves that run through all our experiences; the latter is only an inference that we draw on the basis of our actual experiences. Rather, the human individual is a radically changeable, discontinuous set of experiences. This implication is crucial for understanding Günderrode’s conception of the self. Second, and more importantly for our purposes, what we really are beyond these momentary states is completely unknown—it is beyond the limits of human existence and human experience. However, if, as Günderrode says in her letter to Gunda, we do “enter the borders of a second life” after we die, she claims that we may experience different ways of being and, as she emphasizes in the letter, different forms of consciousness, or different ways of knowing.

But Günderrode does not stop at the speculative moment of suggesting that different forms of experience might open up to us after death; rather, she attempts to imagine what these forms of experience might be like and communicate them to us. In “An Apocalyptic Fragment,” Günderrode describes a vision of immersion in an oceanic whole of experience, understood as a vision of death (this experience is initiated by “passing away” *entschlafen*).\(^{44}\) While in this state, Günderrode’s narrator claims, “I had muffled and tangled dreams, [but] I encountered nothing that reminded me of time.”\(^{45}\) Similarly, Günderrode’s poem “A Dream” envisions continued—but altered—awareness during death:


\(^{43}\) Günderrode (1992, 75).


I came to a dark hollow where past times and the great spirits of antiquity slept a deep
sleep. [....]

And they made all kinds of violent movements, and wanted to rip themselves out of
their slumber; but the spell’s power held them imprisoned in heavy stupefaction.

When I went closer I heard a violent roaring like the wild winds when they pound their
heads howling against cliffs.

And I became aware that it was the destinies of this time, the events of the present, that
rushed so violently into the hollow.

But the confused roaring of their voices pressed only weakly into the ears of the
sleepers.⁴⁶

Günderrode’s visions of death suggest a form of continued awareness after death
that she characterizes as “numb,” “muffled,” “tangled,” “stupefied,” a “dark feeling”
and as lacking memory—as existing only for the present. I think this is Günderrode’s
attempt to depict a form of awareness that is not conscious: a pre-conscious or post-
conscious experience of a self that extends beyond the narrow “self” as we usually
understand it, i.e., the living human individual. This means that Günderrode rejects
the Fichtean and Early German Romantic concept of the necessity of a subject-object distinction for knowledge—although the knowledge she imagines is of a
different kind to the conscious, rational and articulated knowledge that Fichte and
the Early German Romantics had in mind. The kind of knowledge that Günderrode
imagines is a kind of awareness that is not differentiated, separated from, the origin:
perhaps it is something like the “dream” that the spirits of earth mention in “The
Wanderer’s Descent” and that also appears in “The Kiss in the Dream.” It is an
awareness that belongs to a form of life, a selfhood, that is broader than the indi-
vidual selfhood of the subject that we are used to thinking of as essential to
who we are.

This self-beyond-the-self exists within a well thought-out metaphysical context.
There is not space here for a detailed account of Günderrode’s metaphysics, but a
brief sketch is necessary in order to make sense of this claim. So, very quickly:
Günderrode conceives of the world as constituted by entities that are made up of
“elements” which, over time, dissolve—with the death of individual entities—and
are reconstituted in new constellations, incorporating different groups of entities. In
this way, the “earth spirit” or the “idea of the earth” repeatedly manifests itself in
space and time in different forms. According to Günderrode, this model is consis-
tent with what she calls “the idea of the Indians of the transmigration of souls.”⁴⁷

If we apply this model to individual experience, we see that what is essential to
a “self” cannot be individual consciousness as we know it. The self continues after
death—at which point it is reconstituted together with elements from other indi-
vidual entities, potentially also experiencing a division of its own elements into
several new entities. After death, we exceed the boundaries of the entity that we
infer as the substratum for the constantly changing experiences of our lives as

⁴⁷ Günderrode (1990–1991:1, 447–448). For Günderrode’s most succinct and comprehensive
account of this metaphysical model, see her unpublished fragment “Idea of the Earth” (Günderrode
individuals. What would that mean for the experience of the beings that make up this universe? What would that feel like? I suggest that this is the experience that Günderrode attempts to depict through imaginative portrayals of “numbed,” “muffled” and “tangled” awareness.

To help describe this experience, Günderrode also relies on a concept of playful interaction that has been totally overlooked in accounts of her work. In the poem “Once I Lived Sweet Life,” Günderrode describes the shadow of death chasing after the narrator’s “playmates,” who disappear one by one. But this loss is redeemed by a back-and-forth movement between images of heaven and earth, gods and nature, air and the earth—or, in other words, a back-and-forth movement between worldly life and a form of existence in communion with gods and spirits. She writes:

I raised little wings
fluttered now here, now there
was glad of the easy life
at rest in the clear aether.
Saw now in the holy deep
unnameable space of heaven
wonderfully strange images
and figures moving.
 [...] 
Earth and heaven,
following each other
forever in a circle.

In a similar vein, the narrator of “An Apocalyptic Fragment” says: “I let myself be borne by the breezes in swift drafts, I consorted with the sunset, and with the rainbow’s seven-colored drops, I arranged myself with my playmates around the moon when it would have hidden itself, and accompanied its course.” And, later in the same piece: “I was released from the narrow bounds of my being, and no more a single drop; I was given again to everything, and everything belonged with me. I thought, and felt, surged in the ocean, gleamed in the sun, circled with the stars; I felt myself in everything, and enjoyed everything in me.”

Through these images of play and communion, Günderrode describes an easy, joyful movement between life as an individual among other individuals, followed by immersion in a primordial whole—an ocean, or the aether—and re-emergence as

49 Christine Battersby (1995, 98–99; 2007, 120–121, 127) has argued that the spaces in “Once I Lived Sweet Life” relate as forms of (feminine) immanence and (masculine) transcendence, connected by a repeated back-and-forth movement between them. My interpretation builds on Battersby’s but, as I argue elsewhere (Ezekiel 2014), I claim that Günderrode does not view these spaces as fundamentally separate: earthly life and spiritual life are both parts of a single shared world, making the movement between these spaces easy and natural, consistently with how the movement between life and death is depicted in, for example, “An Apocalyptic Fragment.”
a new individual among others, understood as former or potential future parts of oneself. We do not lose ourselves in death, but our self continues into the future in new forms.

Knowledge—or, rather, awareness—of the absolute is possible, for Günderrode, and it is possible to experience ourselves as this absolute, because, she claims, our self-awareness does not disappear with individuated existence, human consciousness, and knowledge of the forms of existence as we know them. “An Apocalyptic Fragment” ends with lines that refer quite explicitly to this overstepping of the bounds of the individual consciousness of a living human being:

Then I thought my longing was also to return to the source of life.

And as I thought this, and felt almost more alive than all my consciousness, suddenly it was as if my mind was surrounded with numbing mists. But they soon disappeared; I seemed to myself no longer to be me, and yet more than ever me, I could no longer find my borders, my consciousness had overstepped them; it was bigger, other, and yet I felt myself in it.\(^53\)

6 Everyday Knowledge, Deeper Knowledge, and Awareness

Near the start of this paper, I posed three questions about Günderrode’s account of knowledge: What does she think knowledge is? What does she think knowledge is for human beings? And what does she think knowledge does for us? We are now in a position to sketch some answers to these questions.

Günderrode differentiates three types of knowledge, or perhaps more accurately, two types of knowledge and one type of something other than knowledge that we might call “awareness.” First, there is the ordinary human knowledge that helps us navigate the everyday world in which we live: knowledge of the objects and events of our world, which are examined more closely in scientific inquiry. Second, there is the deeper knowledge of the reality that underlies this everyday situation: the kind of religious or mystical knowledge that can be had in visions and intuitions. This second kind of knowledge has much in common with other accounts of mystical knowledge of the divine or direct intuitions of the world behind appearances, which can be grasped only murkyly and only in glimpses (for example in the dreams and visions described by Novalis in his “Hymns to the Night”). Lastly, Günderrode suggests that other forms of awareness, beyond the human capacity to know, open up for us before and after death. This awareness is non-conscious and non-articulated, and is hard for us to imagine since it corresponds to a state of being that has little in common with the individuated, conscious life of a human being. Günderrode tries to indicate the nature of this kind of awareness through accounts of dream-like forms of awareness that are “muffled,” “tangled” and “numb.”

The second question I asked was: What does Günderrode think knowledge is for human beings? This can be answered briefly: human beings have knowledge of their

own states. We are aware of our emotional and perceptual states, and we extrapolate from these, on the one hand, to an enduring substrate or “self” that underlies these and, on the other, to an external world of objects and processes that corresponds to these states. In these claims, Günderrode follows other philosophers, especially Fichte. However, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Ezekiel 2016b; Ezekiel 2020), she differs from these in attempting to articulate a model of the self that does not have recourse to this substrate; that is, in other words, a model of the self that takes the radically changeable nature of human experience as the basis of notions of identity.  

Lastly, I asked what Günderrode thinks the purpose of knowledge is, or what knowledge does for us. In accordance with our answer to the first question, we should ask the purpose, not of knowledge in general, but of each these three forms of knowledge or awareness. There is not space for a detailed exploration of these topics here, but we can sketch the likely answers on the basis of the above account, and point to textual evidence for these claims in Günderrode’s writing.

The first kind of knowledge (that is, ordinary knowledge based on our own experiences as well as the more detailed observation of everyday objects in scientific research) is useful for living, i.e., for navigating everyday life. Günderrode indicates quite clearly that she believes that this kind of knowledge has its place. For example, in “Story of a Brahmin,” the narrator describes his skill in acquiring money before he turns to a life of morals and then religious contemplation, and in Magic and Destiny Alcmenes suggests that, for those who crave accomplishments, the everyday world is a better option than the pursuit of deeper knowledge, telling his son:

[...] only recognize your course,
And do not thrust on to the elect
Who humbly consecrate themselves to gods.
The world calls you, fame and honor call you
And the desire for deeds wrenches you into the fray;
By actions the earthly is created,
But heaven will be quietly observed.  

The second kind of knowledge (comprehension of the underlying reality of the world) is often satisfying for those who find it, although in some places, such as in “The Adept” and Magic and Destiny, Günderrode suggests that it can also be terrifying and overwhelming. In addition, in several pieces Günderrode indicates that this form of knowledge can contribute to the derivation of true ideas of virtue and

54 For an account of Günderrode’s conception of the fragmentary, momentary, or “catastrophic” self and its relationship to models of selfhood in Clemens Brentano and Heinrich von Kleist, see Bohrer (1984) and (1989).
beauty. This topic in Günderrode’s work has not yet been investigated, and unfortunately there is not space to consider it in more detail here.

Lastly, there is no indication that Günderrode saw any purpose or use for the kind of awareness that is possible beyond differentiated existence. Instead, this just seems to be the state of affairs to be expected after death (and which, presumably, also existed before we emerged as conscious individuals)—i.e., a state in which the self continues in new forms, which lack consciousness, but retain the ability to experience.

This paper is a preliminary effort to get to grips with Günderrode’s account of knowledge, and I have not attempted to answer conclusively whether Günderrode’s work can be considered a form of negative philosophy. Certainly, there is a negative moment—the moment of “In vain!” or “Too late!” depicted in the Wanderer’s encounter with the spirits of earth—in the movement towards a human relationship with the absolute, or with the “primal force” that lies behind the world of everyday experience. However, the new relationship to this absolute that Günderrode portrays in her prophetic and ecstatic figures is not a path towards better, though always imperfect, knowledge of this absolute (as in Novalis, for example). Instead, it is a specifically human way of living and comprehending in relation to something that will only really be experienced in the new and radically different types of awareness that she maintains await us once we shrug off our human forms.

References


